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In Defense of History

By Donald Kagan

I am most grateful for this great honor. When I think of the list of my brilliant predecessors I feel as most Yale freshmen do soon after arriving on campus. They look about them at their remarkably talented fellow-classmen and nervously ask themselves, "did the admissions office admit me by mistake?" At any rate, I come as a defender of the faith, of the humanities as they were understood ever since the invention of the concept many centuries ago. Their goals were nicely stated by the Renaissance humanist Pietro Paolo Vergerio some six centuries ago as the purposes of a liberal education:

We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man, those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom, that education which calls forth, trains and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which ennoble men and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only, for to a vulgar temper, gain and pleasure are the one aim of existence, to a lofty nature, moral worth and fame.

The training of the intellect was meant to produce an intrinsic pleasure and satisfaction but it also had practical goals of importance to the individual and the entire community, to make the humanistically trained individual eloquent and wise, to know what is good and to practice virtue, both in private and public life.

Such was the understanding of the ancient Greeks and of the Renaissance humanists but not, I fear of many teachers of the humanities today, who deny

the possibility of knowing anything with confidence, of the reality of such concepts as truth and virtue, who seek only gain and pleasure in the modern guise of political power and self-gratification as the ends of education.

Among them it is common to reject any notion of objectivity, of truths arrived at by evidence or reasoning external to whims or prejudices. One famous professor deplored such an idea as foundationalism, defined as, "any attempt to ground inquiry and communication in something more firm and stable than mere belief or unexamined practice."¹ Such views are proposed by literary critics, but their significance is much broader than for the interpretation of literature; they assert that all studies are literature, all, therefore subject to the same indeterminacy as all language. Even death is merely "the displaced name for a linguistic predicament."² It should not be surprising, then, to learn that "the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions."³ What we know of history, after all, we learn from written accounts whose rhetoric "allows for two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view, and therefore puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding."⁴ Including, I presume, any reading or understanding of the quotation I just read.

Such ideas have made their way even into the study of the Classics, but I remain grateful that I have spent much of my life in the exploration of the ancient civilizations, especially that of the Greeks. Because they are at the root of modern civilization, so like us in many ways and so different in others, they offer a perspective removed from the prejudices of time and place that threaten to distort our understanding and yet continually relevant and illuminating to those who will examine them with a mind open to the possibility that useful wisdom can be found in their thought and experience.

Let me offer an example of how a study of the ancient world may help our understanding: the question of the role of the artist in his society. Ever

since the beginning of the Romantic movement the dominant belief has been that a true poet or artist, whatever his genre, must be a rebel against the established order of society. Writers of the past who don't fit the model seem always to be merely the victims of their place in corrupt societies or stooges of those who rule them. The modern critic who discovers this is, of course, free from such influences. To me, and to the poor writers of the past, ignorant of their pitiful roles, art, and especially literature, has an autonomous place apart from politics and sociology, even from philosophy. Its power comes from its ability to choose its own subject, style and purpose. Literature that is shaped merely by its author's time and his place within his society, by his prejudices and purposes, is a poor and weak thing that deserve the social scientific analysis and pseudo-philosophical mumbo-jumbo that pass for literary criticism in our day.

But true artists are not bound by such things. They see through and beyond the prejudices and passions of their own time and place and are bound only by the limits that bind all human beings at all times in all places: the reality of nature and of human nature. There is a natural world outside of human will and desire; man's genius can manipulate it to a considerable extent, and the results can be wonderful, but they are inevitably constrained by the enormous power and mystery of nature and by the limits imposed by man's own nature. For confirmation I turn to the tragic poet Sophocles and especially his drama *Antigone*. There his chorus describes the dilemma:

Wonders are many on earth, and the
greatest of these
Is man, who rides the ocean and takes
his
way
Through the deeps, through wind-swept
valleys of perilous seas
That surge and sway.
He is master of ageless Earth, to his
own
will bending
The immortal mother of gods by the
sweat of his brow,

As year succeeds to year, with toil
 unending
 Of mule and plough.

He is lord of all things living; birds of
 the
 air,
 Beasts of the field, all creatures on sea
 and land
 He takes, cunning to capture and
 ensnare
 With sleight of hand;
 Hunting the savage beasts from the
 upland rocks,
 Teaching the mountain monarch in his
 lair,
 Teaching the wild horse and the
 roaming ox
 His yoke to bear.
 The use of language, the wind-swift
 motion of brain
 He learnt; found out the law of living
 together
 In cities, building him shelter against the
 rain
 And wintry weather.
 There is nothing beyond his power.
 His
 subtlety
 Meets all chance, all danger conquers.
 For every ill has found its remedy,
 Save only death.
 O wondrous subtlety of man, that
 draws
 To good or evil ways! Great honour is
 given
 And power to him who upholds his
 country's laws
 And the justice of heaven.
 But he that, too rashly daring, walks
 in sin
 In solitary pride to his life's end,
 At door of mine shall never enter in
 To call me friend.

Man's ingenuity and power are great, but both his
 power and life are limited. Such is the basis for the
 Greeks' tragic view of life. There is no excuse for
 passivity, for human beings can help shape the

environments that shape them and they have the opportunity and the power to defy their societies and their unjust laws, as Antigone does in defying Creon. He has overridden the unwritten divine law by forbidding the burial of her brother, killed in a rebellion against his state. She chooses to bury her brother and accept a horrible death as the penalty, and we marvel and admire her for it.

So far, it is possible to think of Sophocles as the kind of artist favored today--the champion of revolt against man's fate, so often in our time taken to be the revolt against his society and its ways. True artists, like Sophocles, however, are not propagandists but pursuers of deep, usually complicated, understandings of the human condition. Sophocles's play reveals such complexity. There is something to be said for Creon. His decree is meant to preserve the security of the state and society, the minimal requirement of civilization, the thin veneer that protects us from the plunge into barbarism and savagery. Modern artists tend to assume that the established order is always wrong. Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People* made it clear that the rule applies even to democratic establishments with his passionate assertion that "the majority is always wrong." But the greatest artists are prepared to search for the truth of the human condition wherever the trail may lead. They do not prejudge the outcome. The establishment or the defiant rebel may be right or, as is typical of real tragedy, each may be right in his own way, even as the two rights clash disastrously. Sophocles's portrayal of the struggle is so even-handed that some ancient scholars thought that Creon's case is the stronger and that the play should be called *Creon*, not *Antigone*. That must be wrong, for Antigone alone displays the willful, defiant, single-minded, unrelenting, uncalculating determination to do what she must, regardless of consequences, that is characteristic of Sophoclean heroes. But the point is that Sophocles wrestles with the issues and depicts their champions with such honesty as to do justice to the depth, difficulty and universality of the subject and his characters.

Such an artist does not reflexively take the side of any rebel against the established order. It may be that the establishment is right. More likely, there is a

degree of right on both sides, so that the difficult task for human beings is to gain a deeper understanding of what is at stake, both for individual and society, to understand that the needs of individual and society are both competitive and complementary and to contemplate the resulting dilemma with the seriousness and awe it deserves.

In *Antigone*, Sophocles is concerned, in the first place, with the temptation that power can place in the way of a political leader like Creon to do whatever is necessary, even to violate divine law, in the interest of the state. That would be a comfortable position for a writer in our times. But Sophocles understands the enormous cost when an individual tramples on human law, even in defense of the most fundamental human needs. The resulting clash leaves us neither with a burning determination to overthrow the regime nor to suppress all insurgency. It leaves us emotionally stimulated and then drained, and it leaves our minds alerted and sobered. We have become deeper individuals and wiser citizens.

André Malraux said that "All art is a revolt against man's fate." If he is right, Sophocles's plays, the other tragedies, and much of ancient Greek literature are not art. Malraux seems to me to reflect the Romantic view that is determined to see the artist as an individual apart from, superior to and in rebellion against the established order. Sophocles, like Aeschylus and Thucydides, was very much a part of his society. He fought its battles as a soldier, he understood and appreciated its necessity and excellences even as he probed its dilemmas and weaknesses. His plays, among other things, helped their audiences to understand and come to terms with man's fate. It is man's fate, part of the tragic human condition, to revolt and struggle against its negative elements. But human excellence, virtue, even survival depend on the establishment of a decent social order and its defense even against the most passionate and sincere rebels who would smash it in search of some imagined perfection beyond human grasp.

Because he was part of the society in which he lived and understood its needs and virtues he could compel his fellow citizens honestly to confront its

conflicts and its deepest contradictions. They did not suppress, scorn, or, what is worse, ignore him. Instead, they honored him with prizes, election to the highest military and political office and with deep and abiding reverence. Would that all this were possible for modern artists and their audiences in the world today.

To understand this question, which involves both literature and philosophy, one must study history, my own special field of interest, the dearest to my heart. I want to make the case that history, defined not meanly in the current style as an infinitely malleable tool to be used to achieve current political ends, but as the Greek founders of the genre did, can be the most valuable approach to achieve the proper goals of the humanities.

The world we live in is a difficult place to try to make a case for the value of history. Through the centuries its claim has rested chiefly on its search for truths arrived at by painstaking research conducted with the greatest possible objectivity, explaining events by means of human reason. Its various goals, as the late Arnaldo Momigliano put it, were "to provide an example, constitute a warning, point to likely developments in human affairs." The ancient Greek historians, the earliest and still among the greatest, set the agenda, taking as their subjects large events affecting great numbers of people in dramatic and powerful ways.

Herodotus, the first true historian, wrote of the war in which a band of small Greek city-states defended their freedom against the assault of the vast and mighty Persian Empire. He wrote, he said, "so that time may not blot out from among men the memory of the past, and that the fame of the great and marvelous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners may not be lost, and especially the reason why they fought against each other." Here, from the very beginning of the genre, we can discern the special place occupied by history among humanistic studies. Like literature, specifically the epic poetry of Homer, it has the responsibility of preserving the great, important and instructive actions of human beings, individually and in the mass so that we may marvel at them and learn from them. It sets the historian the task, however, not merely of

describing events in evocative language that will impress them on human hearts and arouse an emotional response but also, like philosophy, to explain their meaning by the use of reason.

Thucydides, a younger contemporary of Herodotus, took on the same assignments. He wanted to memorialize the great event of his day, the war between Sparta and Athens.

Thucydides tells us that he undertook his history:

in the belief that it would be great and noteworthy above all the wars that had gone before.... For this was the greatest upheaval that had ever shaken the Hellenes, extending also to some part of the barbarians, one might say even to a very large part of mankind.

No one who has read his dramatic accounts of the debates in the various assemblies, and especially his heart-rending account of the destruction of the Athenian forces that invaded Sicily will doubt his literary artistry in achieving that goal. But Herodotus' story had a happy ending, while Thucydides' tale was far grimmer. The account of the Persian War seems filled with sunshine; the report of the Peloponnesian War seems to have been written in twilight. Herodotus, like Homer, tells good stories for their own sake, whether he believes them or not. Most of his explanations of events credit human agents alone, but, again like Homer, he leaves plenty of room for the intervention of the gods. Thucydides ruthlessly excludes everything not clearly relevant to his task and employs cold reason alone in his explanations. Herodotus obtained the necessary information by asking people who seemed to know something he was interested in, sometimes reporting more than one account of things without choosing among them, sometimes making a choice based on the exercise of reason and what seemed likely. This was not good enough for Thucydides. "As to the facts of what happened," he said, "I did not learn them from any chance informant nor did I think it proper to write down what seemed probable to me but by investigating each of them with the greatest possible accuracy, both those events at which I was

present myself and those I learned about from others. And the discovery of these facts was laborious, since eye-witnesses to the same events did not give the same reports of them, either because of partisanship or failure of memory."

Thucydides understood that his careful attention to factual accuracy came at a literary price. "Perhaps," he says, "the absence of the fabulous from my account will seem less pleasing to the ear." But he judges the sacrifice necessary to achieve a higher goal, a philosophic one with great practical application: "If those who wish to have a clear understanding both of the events of the past and of the ones that some day, as is the way in human things, will happen again in the future in the same or a similar way, will judge my work useful, that will be enough for me. It has been composed not as a prize-essay in a competition, to be heard for a moment, but as a possession forever."

These lines seem plainly to be a critique of Herodotus and then a bold claim to contribute to rational, philosophic understanding. Even beyond that, I believe, they lay claim to practical usefulness in dealing with real human problems in the real world. These are the missions for the historian: to examine important events of the past with painstaking care and the greatest possible objectivity, to seek a reasoned explanation for them based on the fullest and fairest possible examination of the evidence in order to preserve their memory and to use them to establish such uniformities as may exist in human events, and then to apply the resulting understanding to improve the judgment and wisdom of people who must deal with similar problems in the future. That is the legacy the Greek historians handed down to their successors which, when practiced well, makes Clio the Queen of the Humanities, standing between and slightly above her noble handmaidens, the muses of literature and philosophy.

So say I, but not everyone has agreed. Critics of history have been legion, running the gamut from the sophisticated, wickedly witty Voltaire, who asserted that: "History is a pack of tricks the living play upon the dead," to the simpler remark of Henry Ford that "History is bunk." A more serious critique,

favoring literature, came soon after the invention of history from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which says:

A poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably. The difference between a historian and a poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse. Indeed the writings of Herodotus could be put into verse and yet would still be a kind of history, whether written in meter or not. The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is somewhat more philosophical [*philosophoteron*] and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.

By a general truth I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily. That is what poetry aims at. A particular fact is what Alcibiades did or what was done to him.

Aristotle, of course, would have claimed the same advantage for philosophy which must also be more *philosophos* than history. He had great learning and wisdom but, like Homer, even he occasionally nodded. The primary source for what Alcibiades did and suffered, in fact, is Thucydides, and it is hard to believe that Aristotle did not read his history. If he did, this assertion is truly astonishing for, as we have seen, Thucydides took the greatest pains to discover what particular people did precisely in order to establish general truths about human behavior. He stood at a position on the road from literature to philosophy. Like the poet he was free to select his topic, to define its boundaries, to treat some events and topics at greater length than others, to emphasize some things and touch lightly on others. Unlike the creative writer, however, the historian may not invent characters or events or chronology but must report with the greatest possible accuracy the doings of real people, keeping to the true order in which they happened.

To the extent that he fails in those responsibilities he is not a bad historian but no historian at all.

Yet, if he follows the rules, carefully establishes the facts and reports them in their true chronological order and does no more, he is still not a historian but a chronicler. It is not enough to record a certain level of events each year, however accurately. The historian must select a topic of importance. Even a narrative history must organize and arrange events in such a way as to reveal their significance most effectively. He must try to explain why things happened as they did and what may be learned about human affairs and behavior in general from the events he has studied. In this respect his work must be philosophical.

But unlike philosophers and their post-enlightenment offspring, the social scientists, who usually prefer to explain a vast range of particular phenomena by the simplest possible generalization, historians must be prepared to explain the variety of behavior in various ways. The well-known lines of the ancient Greek poet Archilochus present the two fundamental choices: "The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one:/ one big one." This may work in the animal kingdom, but in the world of human affairs, wildly complicated by the presence of individual wills and of different ideas of what produces or deprives people of happiness and honor, in what does interest consist and of what there is to fear, extremely general explanations are neither useful nor possible. Historians, in the first instance, need to be foxes, using as many tricks as they can to explain as many particular things as accurately and convincingly as they can. Then, they should try to find revealing examples from the wide variety of human experiences to support generalizations of varying breadth. They should not expect to find the one big trick that will explain everything, but the lesser generalizations that can be tested by other understandings of the evidence and by new human experiences as they arise, which can still be interesting and useful. It is this mixed path taken by the historian, chiefly of the fox but with a necessary element of the hedgehog that promises the best results.

The poet, inspired by a unique personal perception

and understanding, may shed a more intense and powerful light on some human affairs than the most careful and serious historian. We may admire its brilliance and originality, but are his revelations right? When we think so, it is by intuition that we are convinced or by some feeling that the poet's perception accords with our own experience. But everyone has his own intuition and experience. The literary road to the understanding of human things calls for generalizing from a single perception. It can be galvanizing, inspiring, but not satisfying to the mind. The literary experience is primarily aesthetic and emotional, not intellectual or practical.

Philosophy is a word and concept harder to define but among the many definitions I find in my dictionary the following strikes me as most central: "inquiry into the nature of things based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods." The pursuit of philosophy does not preclude the study of human experience to provide material for contemplation and analysis by ordered reason, but experience is clearly subordinate and ancillary. Even Aristotle, who for centuries was known as *the* philosopher and liked to begin his inquiries with reference to the experience and thought of real people, did not investigate these widely or deeply but just until they produced the inevitable intellectual difficulties, the *aporiai*, to which he then applied his great powers of logic and reason. There are great advantages for our understanding of the nature of things in it: pointing out sloppy thinking and helping to correct it; the ability to analyze things that appear unitary or to bring together others that seem hopelessly disparate; the search for simpler, more general principles than those available to the empirical students of human experience, among others. But philosophy inevitably leads to metaphysics, the investigation of first principles and the problem of ultimate reality, which over the millennia has led to massive disagreement, no progress, cynicism and rejection. Wags have described the pursuit of metaphysics as looking in a perfectly dark box for a black cat that doesn't exist. More seriously, the situation has driven professional students of philosophy to such despair as to reject entirely the most basic and compelling questions as impossible, in fact as non-existent, merely the result of bad thinking or improper grammar. In that spirit

the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines philosophy narrowly as "the critical examination of the grounds for fundamental beliefs and an analysis of the basic concepts of such beliefs." Aristotle must have rolled over in his grave when he first learned of the thin gruel modern teachers have made of his rich philosophical porridge. Fortunately, a small band of scholars have not given up the search for wisdom that is true philosophy, but their tribe is small and their enemies legion. A field of study in such shape can not help us much in our efforts to comprehend the human condition.

None of this is to say that history is without its problems for our purpose. Although, in its moderate way, it has not suffered so badly as philosophy from the linguistic analysts or literature from the pseudo-philosophers, it has not escaped the assaults of post-modernism in its various forms. A major assault is in the area of subject matter and attitude. The traditional great events and subjects: high politics, constitutions, diplomacy, war, great books and ideas, are not to be considered, except to show why they must be excluded as the product of dead white males engaged in the permanent process of oppressing good ordinary people of one kind or another. The purpose of the enterprise is not to seek the truth with the greatest objectivity one can muster but to raise the consciousness of the oppressed, to bring them the self-esteem they will need to overthrow the current version of this ancient establishment.

Some historians may not be convinced by these beliefs, observing that post-modernists assert that there is no such thing as truth, only self-interest, prejudice and power, that there is no objectivity, that all statements of fact or value are relative and claims to the existence or search for objective truth are part of the racket by which the ruling groups try to retain power. Such doubters may point out that the opinions of those making these claims should be ignored since, by their own admission, their claims can not be objective or true but merely devices to gain power.

Although historians in universities have given far too much ground to such mindlessness promoted by contemporary political partisanship, as historians

they are better situated than their colleagues in the other humanities to recover their senses. They know that the current fad of skepticism and relativism is as old as the Sophists of ancient Greece and had a great revival with the Pyrrhonism of the sixteenth century. On both occasions their paradoxical and self-contradictory glamour yielded in time to common sense and the massive evidence that some searches are more objective, some things truer than others, however elusive perfect objectivity and truth may be.

Historians have reason to know this and to resist the blatantly subjective and untruthful assault of the modern-day sophists, confident that if they hold, or return, to their traditional methods, which allow them to correct errors in our beliefs about the past, or, sometimes, to bring new evidence and perceptions, that may have the effect of refining or even confirming what has been believed. For history is a discipline in which the improvement of understanding is not impossible, random, nor merely cyclical, but cumulative.

Perhaps you will think that my own approach is not entirely objective, that it is shaped by what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*, so let me say at once that it goes without saying that literature, philosophy and history have long been valuable roads to the understanding of the human condition, and all make important contributions, but I confess that as to their relative merits my mind is not completely open. Perhaps my view could be compared with that of the clergyman who listened to a heated debate among his fellow divines, each claiming the superiority of his sect. At last, he intervened with these words: "Friends, let us not quarrel among ourselves in this sectarian fashion. We all seek to work God's will, you in your several ways, I in His."

But I believe there is more to my claim than mere prejudice related to professional deformation. Two millennia ago the Roman historian Livy's introduction to his great narrative account of his nation's history included this observation:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that

you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous monument; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and shameful in the result. (1.10)

That is a view of the purpose of historical study that went out of favor with professionals in the nineteenth century and is not thought respectable in our time. As a result it has been increasingly harder to persuade people that they have anything to learn from history. At the same time, the retreat by professors of history from the tradition of writing narrative accounts that explain the past by telling a story has further repelled potential readers. This has not, however, deterred millions of people hungry for historical writing from reading those historians who will interpret the past by narrating a story and are alert to the moral implications, personal and political, of the story they tell. And why should it be otherwise? The fact is that we all need to take our moral bearings all the time, as individuals and as citizens. Religion and the traditions based on it were once the chief sources for moral confidence and strength. Their influence has faded in the modern world, but the need for a sound base for moral judgments has not. If we can not look simply to moral guidance firmly founded on religious precepts it is natural and reasonable to turn to history, the record of human experience, as a necessary supplement if not a substitute. History, it seems to me, is the most useful key we have to open the mysteries of the human predicament. Is it too much to hope that one day we may see Clio ascend her throne again and resume her noble business at the same old stand?

1. Stanley Fish, cited by Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals*, New York, 1990, p.156. [[Return to lecture](#)]
2. Paul de Man, cited in David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, New York, 1991, p.93. [[Return to lecture](#)]
3. *Ibid.*, p.81. [[Return to lecture](#)]

4. Ibid., p.129. [[Return to lecture](#)]

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